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# THE IRISH LAND QUESTION.

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## SCHEME FOR A PEASANT PROPRIETARY IN IRELAND.

BY

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Toronto.

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TORONTO:

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IT is now six years since a calamitous failure of the crops in Ireland drew the attention of the civilized world to the destitution which then prevailed in that unhappy country, the most highly favoured by Nature, in its soil and climate, of any portion of the United Kingdom. The condition of Ireland at that time, with its political and economical troubles, so interested me that I was led to prepare a paper dealing with the Land Question, in which I proposed a remedy for the country's ills which I hoped would meet the wants of the people, raise them in the scale of being, and prevent the recurrence of such scenes of poverty and destitution as periodically presented themselves for relief to the charity of more highly favoured and prosperous communities. The ideas advanced in that paper were those which, if political agitation and agrarian outrage are ever to cease in Ireland, must be adopted, namely : that land must come under the ownership of those who expend their industry in giving it or maintaining its value, and from which only they can adequately derive support. The present laws which govern the tenure of land in Ireland, and exclude agricultural labourers from the politic ownership of the soil they cultivate, must continue to work out their crop of trouble, and perpetuate an hereditary degraded class, with no stimulus to industry or thrift, and no hope but to sink deeper and deeper in the mire of poverty and serfdom. The full and complete possession of the land by those who till it is admittedly the only motive sufficient to induce men hopefully and successfully to cultivate it ; and, in the condition of things in Ireland, it is, I am convinced, the one proposal likely to content labour, remove disaffection, and allay strife. All laws, I hold, therefore, which restrain the present proprietors from selling their lands, which perpetuate the evils of primogeniture and entail,

and which continue to grind the face of labour for the benefit of absentee landlords and extortioners, must be altered, and some scheme adopted which will meet the circumstances of the case. The solution of the problem, to my mind, is to be found in the acquisition or expropriation by the Imperial Government of such tracts of land in Ireland as can be advantageously worked by a peasant proprietary, to be sold to them on easy conditions of payment—a fair value, determined by competent and disinterested appraisers, being paid to the present owners of the lands acquired or expropriated.

The present moment I have thought opportune for reproducing the details of the scheme proposed by me in 1880, and embodied in an article published in the *Canadian Monthly* for December of that year. The proposal was so favourably received and commented upon at the time that I am induced now to republish it, in the hope that it may aid in the solution of a problem which presents great difficulties to the statesmen and legislators who are now pressingly called to deal with the question. The details of my scheme were at the time briefly summarized in an English journal—the *London Globe* of May 6th, 1881—and may here be quoted for the benefit of those who, before reading the paper itself, may wish to see in brief what are the drift and scope of my suggestions :

A PEASANT PROPRIETARY.—THE TORONTO PROPOSAL FOR RIGHT-  
ING IRELAND'S WRONGS.

“A writer in the *Canadian Monthly*, a magazine of considerable ability, published at Toronto, propounds a tempting scheme by which a peasant proprietary might be created in Ireland without doing wrong to any one, and without eventually costing the State a farthing. The first step is that any landowner who wished to dispose of his property should address a proposal to that effect to the Government. The value having been ascertained by duly qualified experts appointed for the purpose, the owner would receive payment in scrip, carrying three per cent. interest, the same being guaranteed by Government. This part of the business being finished, the land so acquired would be put up for sale in lots, small or big, as circumstances might render advisable, but the purchaser would not be asked to pay up at once. During the first five years, he would merely have to hand in annually an amount equiva-

lent to five per cent. on the purchase money. At the end of that period, however, he would have to pay one quarter of his outstanding indebtedness, and so on, until at the end of twenty years the whole was liquidated. The difference of two per cent. between the interest payable by Government on the scrip and the amount received from the purchaser under that head would be retained to cover expenses, any balance going eventually to the scrip-holders. These latter, too, would have the right of deciding, at the termination of the twenty years, whether they would prefer to retain their scrip in perpetuity, or to hand it back to Government in exchange for the money received by the latter from the purchaser. The scheme, it will be seen, is not without merit, the chief objection being that it would temporarily convert the State into a landlord, and thus bring the Government into greater odium than ever with the Irish people."—*London Globe*, May 6, 1881.

My proposals, it will be seen, suggest a simple but constitutional plan—new at the time in Britain, but since taken up and more or less seriously considered—for dealing with the land troubles of Ireland, and likely to relieve the country at once of agitation and distress. The plan is based on the mode of settlement known to be adopted in the early history of the colonies, and which, on repeated occasions, was advantageously acted upon at one period in the history of Canada. At the time my paper was published, the Imperial Government of the day was about to submit a measure to Parliament dealing with the Land Question, which, it was confidently affirmed, would solve this, the most interesting and important of questions affecting the United Kingdom and its dependencies. Not only this, but other remedial measures, have been passed in Parliament without successfully curing the evils Ireland has long complained of, or, in any appreciable degree, pacifying the people. Year by year matters have become worse; and the longer the true remedy is withheld the more bitter will be the feeling of the Irish people, and the more surely will disloyalty and treason raise their heads.

A word or two, briefly, on the objections likely to be raised to my scheme. First, it may be said, as indeed the *London Globe* has said, that the expropriation of the land for the benefit of its occupiers converts the State into a landlord—the supreme object of Irish aversion. To this I reply that it is a necessity

of the situation, though only a temporary one ; and should the measure be taken up and acted upon, it is clear that the Government, in so beneficent an act, would not symbolize the landlord of Irish prejudice and hatred, and in its relations with the peasant proprietors would take care to conciliate and smoothen the path of those who sought to raise themselves in the social and industrial scale. Care would also have to be taken that, until the new proprietors had paid off their indebtedness on the land, facilities should be withheld from them in obtaining advances from money-lenders on the amounts paid to Government on their lands, or on improvements made in their holdings. To allow too easy a resort to the money-lender would be fatal to the scheme ; and it is important that safeguards should surround the peasant proprietor during the period of the Government's relations with him. One other objection remains to be noticed, namely, that no ameliorating Government measure will satisfy Irish discontent or remove Celtic aversion to Saxon rule. But this, in my opinion, is too pessimistic a view to be reasonably held. Give the Irish peasant, what he has never had, a stake in the country, and the game of the professional political agitator will cease. Foreign inciters of sedition and rebellion, the strong hand of the law should with rigour suppress ; and this pestilent class, I hope, the Government will have no scruple in sharply dealing with and thrusting from the kingdom.

Since the paper was written, it has been ascertained that there are large tracts of land in Ireland which might be advantageously reclaimed at a moderate outlay, and this work the Government might undertake so as to give immediate employment to needy peasants, and add to the cultivable and producing area of the island. The extent of these waste lands is estimated at seven or eight millions of acres. For their recovery I would urge upon Government the wisdom and policy of expropriating these lands and expending, say, half a million a year on their reclamation. This enterprise would not only be profitable to the Crown, but materially aid in the working out of the larger scheme—of redeeming the land from the present holders of it and assisting the poor peasant in raising himself to the status, with all that this implies, of a prosperous and contented landowner. That accomplished, the distress which weighs heavily on vast bodies of men in Ireland

would be removed, and the agitations that convulse the country and imperil the peace and integrity of the Empire would be allayed.

In addition to reclaiming the land, Government might with great advantage to Ireland expend a considerable sum in erecting the port of Galway into a harbour, fitted to make it a station for the arrival and departure of a fleet of first-class Ocean Steamers, by which the voyage to and from Quebec, *via* the straits of Belle Isle, would be shortened by two days, at least, and the effect of which would give that route a monopoly of the carriage of the European mails and the passenger traffic.

L. M.

BEVERLEY STREET, TORONTO, *25th March, 1886.*

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## THE IRISH LAND QUESTION.

*(From the CANADIAN MONTHLY, for December, 1880.)*

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The present condition of a large portion of the inhabitants of Ireland is most deplorable : great numbers are on the verge of starvation, and appeals for aid on their behalf are made to the wealthy and charitable in the British Dominions, in the United States, and also in other countries. Poverty always abounds in Ireland : it seems to be chronic in that unhappy country, but every few years a season of extreme destitution occurs, owing principally to a failure in the harvest ; and consequently a cry of agony is then raised, that extends from the shores of the Island to the dwellers in more favoured countries. This cry has often been heard, and as often been practically answered by sympathizing people, who have contributed of their substance to relieve those who stretched out their hands to them in their emergency.

The requests that are now so urgently made for assistance are being promptly and heartily responded to ; large amounts of money and provisions are being collected and forwarded for the benefit of those who require relief, and the probability is that enough will be obtained to meet the present emergency ;

but as public attention has been so impressively called to the wretchedness of Ireland, would it not be well to consider whether anything could be done to prevent a recurrence of those painful events, which, to a more or less extent, are so frequently thrust upon the notice of the world? It is not creditable to Ireland, nor to the Great British Empire of which it forms so important a part, that it should be obliged to assume such a humiliating position as it now exhibits. Are there any means that can be devised in order to make this public application for charitable assistance the last it shall be obliged to put forth? Can anything be done to remove the causes that produce the effects under which it at present suffers, and which, for many years, have kept it in a state of tribulation and discontent?

Ireland is mainly an agricultural country, and the great majority of its population derive their subsistence from their farms. The condition of the people therefore depends in a special manner upon their relation to the soil. Is its land extensive enough for their numbers? Is it advantageously owned, and judiciously worked? and are the revenues derived from it properly expended?

In a speech made by Mr. Dowd, at a large meeting held in New York a short time since, he said that the Island contained about twenty million acres, on which reside about five millions of people; this would give an average of about four acres to each individual were the surface equally divided among them. Assuming that Mr. Dowd is correct, which, I think, is the case, as he speaks as one having personal experience of the facts, it would appear that the country, making due allowance for pleasure-grounds, and for waste places, and bearing in mind that a certain number of the community are engaged in trades, in commerce, and in other occupations, was fairly capable of sustaining its present population. If so, this would dispose of the question as to the extent of area.

Then, as to the advantageous ownership of the land. The argument is that most of the country is owned by comparatively few persons, and is held by them under such laws as make it almost impossible for most of the peasants ever to own even a single acre of the domains they occupy. The custom of many of the large landowners is to live out of the country, and to let their estates in parcels to tenants, who sub-let to others, who

sub-let in their turn, and so on, until at last the allotments come down to mere patches that are worked by the tenants of many tenants, each lessor attempting to make something out of the lessee, and it is evident the great burden of these transactions falls at last upon the ultimate and poorest link in the chain. It is not to be expected that land, held in such a manner, would be judiciously worked, or could be said to be advantageously owned.

I will now consider how the revenues derived from the tenantry are expended. All the lands in Ireland are not treated in the way I have described : some of the landlords reside in the country, and either farm their own properties, or else rent them to immediate tenants, allowing of no middlemen. The rents and profits received by these landlords are expended in their respective neighbourhoods to the benefit of all parties concerned, but the remainder of these landlords, and these among the largest proprietors, act otherwise. They are non-resident, and allow their estates to be let and re-let, careless of how they are managed, provided the rents are paid to them as they become due, their object being to screw as large a rental as they can out of their tenantry, with as little trouble as possible. They form the class well known under the name of absentees, and as such drain the country continuously of a large amount of its annual earnings. It is impossible that any community can be prosperous that is subjected to such a mode of treatment : of course there are noble exceptions to the class I have described.

The resident and the absentee proprietors differ widely in many respects as to their characteristics and their degree of influence on society, yet several of them agree in this, they are large landholders, although they are comparatively few in number, yet they hold their estates in huge blocks, and under laws that are adverse to its distribution into small portions. Some of them, perhaps, would sell if they could, but it may be their estates are encumbered, and perhaps entailed, their titles may be complicated, and even if they were disposed to sell, they might have great difficulty in finding suitable purchasers.

Irish tenants are not the only persons that have suffered. Owing to the treatment of the lands I have described, the landlords have very frequently failed to obtain the returns they might expect from their estates. Bad farming and unpropitious

seasons have often rendered it impossible for the tenants to pay the amounts of their rents, and it has occurred that landlords some from good nature and others from stern necessity, have forgiven portions of rent to them by impecunious tenants ; indeed, the land laws of the country have proved injurious to the true interests of the community as a whole.

It is allowed by all who have given attention to Irish affairs that they are in an unsatisfactory position, and that it would be very desirable if an improvement could be made in them. It is acknowledged that Ireland suffers under many grievances that create not only poverty, but also discontent, and it has been often asked, can these unfavourable circumstances be removed or even diminished. Various plans have been proposed as likely to bring about such results : some of these plans have been of an extreme character, and would never be agreed to by the landholders. Among the best of the methods proposed, that of Mr. Bright takes a prominent position, but the adoption of it, in my opinion, is not desirable, as it would entail a great amount of expense, and throw too much responsibility on the Government, which it would not be judicious to assume.

It is the object of this paper to suggest a method that seems to me to be simple and practicable, one that, if carried out, would materially change the face of the country, and partly improve the condition of its inhabitants, and that in an easy, constitutional manner and a mode that would not interfere with the vested rights of the present estate holders. The scheme is not one that aims at giving merely temporary relief, or at transiently assisting the tenantry of Ireland, and leaving them exposed in future years to disasters similar to those under which they now suffer. It aims at radically altering and elevating their whole social standing for all time to come.

It appears to me that the estates of the country are too extensive, and in too few hands, that it would be much better for the nation if the ownership were more divided among the community, and that if the estates were so divided the soil would be better cultivated, and therefore would yield larger returns for the labour bestowed upon it.

The plan I propose is this : let the landlords, who may desire to do so, surrender their estates to the Government, or to commissioners appointed for that purpose, sitting in Dublin, with branches in each county or subdivision of a county, each

with its staff of land-surveyors and valuers, which shall report to the central board in Dublin. This would ensure despatch as well as uniformity of procedure. Let the owners receive an amount of scrip, to be issued by the Government, equal to the worth of their lands, as ascertained by proper valuers; let the commissioners then divide these properties into smaller holdings, or into such parcels as would best meet the demand in the various localities, and sell them to persons prepared to purchase them at prices not less than the valuations of the experts. The Government would accept lands whose titles were to their satisfaction. If necessary, an Act of Parliament could be passed to cure defects. The deeds issued by the Government to the purchasers of these divided lands to be absolute; in fact, patents from the Crown. Registry Offices to be established for the enrolment of deeds and documents affecting the lands.

Suppose the Government acquired and distributed 1,000,000 acres in this manner, and say they were valued at £20 per acre, this would be £20,000,000, for which stock would be issued for the amount, bearing 3 per cent. interest per annum, payable half-yearly. This stock I propose shall be handed over to the landholders *pro rata* in payment of their lands, such stock to be either perpetual or terminable. When desired, the law of entail can be extended from the land to its *value*, invested in the Government Funds, which stock shall be held liable to all the conditions of the law of entail, as will be explained presently.

Let this 1,000,000 acres be sold to purchasers, in small blocks, at the £20 per acre mentioned above, payable, say, in four quinquennial periods, interest half-yearly in advance on amount unpaid, at 5 per cent. per annum. Of this 5 per cent. the Government would pay the landlord 3 per cent. as a dividend on the amount of his stock, half-yearly, and retain the 2 per cent. for charges and expenses of various descriptions. At the end of twenty years the unexpended portion of the 2 per cent. might be handed to the landlords *pro rata*.

Let us take an example. A landlord surrenders his estate of 1,000 acres to the Government, he would receive 3 per cent. scrip for this, to the amount of £20,000, interest payable thereon half-yearly £300 (£600 per annum), the land would be divided into plots of various dimensions, a person would purchase one

plot, containing, say, five acres, the cost of this at £20 per acre, would be £100 ; he would pay the first half-year's interest or rent £2 10s. cash down, and thereafter half-yearly in advance, for five years, when he would pay his first instalment of £25 ; then, of course, his interest or rent would be correspondingly diminished, and so on, until at the end of the twenty years he would have paid all off, principal and interest, and have acquired an absolute right to his little estate. This mode, if carried out, would, in a few years, fill the island with a sturdy, prosperous, and contented body of small landholders.

As to the Government scrip, to be landed to the landlords, they might elect whether they would have it perpetual or terminable. If perpetual, the Government would retain the quinquennial payments for their own use ; but if the landlords desired it, they might have the scrip terminable, in which case they would have the quinquennial instalments handed over to them, consequently their scrip and interest would be proportionately diminished at each payment, and in twenty years the whole transaction would come to an end. In either mode, the unused portion of the 2 per cent. retained half-yearly would, at the close of the transaction, be handed over to the landlord, the object of the Government being, not to make money on the lands, but to facilitate their distribution. If there were any incumbrances on an estate at the time of its transfer to the commissioners, these officers would retain a sufficient amount of scrip to satisfy these claims, and as moneys were received from the small purchasers, they would liquidate the amount due.

The values I have put on the lands and on their rentals, and the terms of payments of instalments on sales, are merely mentioned for the sake of illustrating the scheme. They could all be altered to suit the values of the purchasers ; such alterations would not interfere with the general feature of the project.

For the convenience of purchasers, the Government could either create a new bank of deposit, or use, say, the Bank of Ireland for that purpose. The Bank should have branch offices in various places, in all centres of labour, where the purchasers could pay their half-yearly rents, and also, from time to time, deposit sums to provide for the quinquennial payments ; in fact, to be the Savings Banks of the people,

without the restrictions and limitations of the ordinary Savings Banks. A liberal rate of interest should be allowed on these deposits; everything should be done to induce the people to deal directly with the State, without the intervention of middlemen; they should be educated to regard the Government as the custodian of their interests, and their best friend. The cost of management of these Banks would be moderate, considering the amount of work done by them, and the feeling of security they would impart to the community. I consider their establishment highly desirable; indeed, essential to the success of the whole undertaking.

The advantages resulting from the proposed division of the estates would not be confined to the small purchasers, the large landholders would also be participants, as by means of the arrangement they would readily obtain fair values, and in the large majority of cases considerably increased values, for their properties, and in many instances receive an amount of Government scrip therefor, the interest of which would vastly exceed the value of their present rentals, and this without trouble, expense, or uncertainty to them. They would exchange a certainty for an uncertainty, and at an increase of rental. An additional benefit that would follow would be that the vexatious and difficult subject of tenant rights would be avoided. It would be well, however, for the scheme to embrace a provision that should a purchaser be able to show that he had really effected substantial improvements on his property, an extension of the times of payment might be granted to him.

I think it most likely that many of the large landholders would, if the Government offered to purchase their domains on the terms now propounded, readily accept and transfer their properties accordingly; this would induce others to follow their example, as they would soon see that Government scrip was much better than uncultivated estate and a dissatisfied tenantry. In my opinion the gentry of Ireland would willingly adopt any means that would promote the national prosperity, if a feasible scheme were submitted for their consideration.

There would be no difficulty in disposing of the estates if they were divided into small holdings. The intense desire of the Irish people to hold land is well known. They will even now take up their small patches at what to them are enormous rentals, and the competition evinced for occupancy encourages

the landlords to refrain from making those improvements, either to the grounds or to the houses, that are customary in England; indeed, the houses might be more correctly termed hovels, many of them not being fit for human habitation.

In order to recommend the adoption of this scheme, and to show what I believe would be its results, I will narrate the events of a Canadian undertaking, to which I think it will bear a strong resemblance.

Some sixty years ago a gentleman, under certain circumstances, was induced to purchase a township, embracing some 40,000 or 50,000 acres, which were covered for the most part by a dense forest. He laid this land out in plots of 100 and 200 acres, and offered them for sale. He sold them on the terms, say, of one-fourth or one-fifth cash down, and the balance in yearly instalments, with interest on amount unpaid. Some purchasers were able to make the cash payments, but many were not, and had nothing to offer in security but their brave hearts and willing hands. The gentleman for some time felt quite discouraged at the prospects of his venture, but a shrewd friend advised him to "hold on," assuring him that as the land was gradually cleared up, and brought under cultivation, the settlers would be able to raise crops and pay all their arrears. This assurance proved correct, and the end of the matter was that the gentleman, the head of a large family, was enabled, from the sales of his township, after retaining an ample competence for himself, to settle *in his lifetime* a handsome fortune on each of his children, whose descendants to this day reap the benefit of their ancestor's enterprise. As for the township, it is now well cleared and settled, and one of the best in Canada; and it has been brought to its present condition by men, many of whom, when they began their labours on it, were about as poor as men could be. Now, if these Canadian settlers could hew for themselves comfortable homes out of the forest, with only the then limited markets in which to dispose of their products, under how much better auspices would the Irish farmer start, with his lands all cleared to his hand, and, in addition, lying within an easy distance of the best markets in the world.

The Canadian Government has a mode of rendering assistance to settlers in the backwoods that might be adopted in Ireland—that is, by making grants of money to construct

roads, bridges, or other improvements. The settlers may, if they like, work on these undertakings, and thus earn money to assist them, during the first few years of their struggle in the bush, to support their families and to pay the instalments on their lands. The British Government might undertake public works in Ireland upon or near the estates under consideration, on which, perhaps, many of the purchasers could find employment, and the workmen would deposit in the branch or savings banks as much of their earnings as they could afford, and thus be assisted to provide for the amount of the quinquennial instalments on their little freeholds.

It is true the Government frequently spends a considerable amount of money on public works in Ireland, but the funds so distributed afford merely temporary relief to those who may be employed on them. Nothing permanent results from the assistance thus given; but if the labourers had before their eyes the prospect of securing a comfortable homestead, they would be stimulated to make exertions and practise frugality in order to accomplish so desirable a result. Under fair circumstances, there are no more frugal or industrious men than Irishmen; this is continually shown here, in Canada, some of whose most prosperous citizens are of that nationality. It is well known that great numbers of the Irish peasants go over yearly to England, to assist the farmers to gather in their harvests, and thus earn a few pounds with which to pay the rents of their miserable holdings at home; and surely the men who would go such a distance to earn money to discharge their mere rents would gladly work, if necessary, doubly hard in their own country to ensure to them the acquisition of a piece of freehold property.

If the British Government deemed it advisable, they might make a special grant to the purchasers, to assist them, say, in the payment of their first instalment of rent, or interest, but this would be quite an act of favour. It must be borne in mind that for the first twenty years the purchasers would pay merely interest and instalments, all rates and charges on land being paid during that time by the Government, out of the two per cent. retained by them; but at the expiration of the twenty years, the purchasers would become educated to assume these responsibilities, and would in fact become "Home Rulers" through their municipal government.

I do not wish at all to discourage emigration from Ireland to Canada; I believe it would greatly benefit Ireland if she sent her surplus population to this country, where there is ample room for any number of settlers; but a certain amount of people will always prefer to remain in the land of their nativity, rather than encounter the trials consequent upon a removal to a far-off country.

If at any time a small proprietor wanted to sell his holding, he could easily find a purchaser, who would recompense him for his improvements or payments thereon; indeed, the probability is, that on account of these improvements the place would have increased so much in value that the settler would make a profit from his outlay on it.

The creation of a class of small yeoman landholders would be of great advantage to Ireland: it would calm the public mind, get rid of agitators, and immediately please the people, as it would bring the land back into the hands of the descendants of those who owned the country in olden times. It would give to the new proprietors of the soil a direct and important stake in the country, and make them deeply interested in its peace and advancement. The benefits that would result to England would be equally great. She would have a poor and discontented neighbour changed into a thriving and satisfied friend, for Ireland, by enjoying her own resources, would rapidly accumulate wealth. The people of both countries would recognize that their great interests were identical, and desire each other's prosperity; for Ireland would find in England a ready and lucrative market for her agricultural products, and in consequence become enriched. She would, in her turn, consume a large amount of English manufactures, the profits on which would be much more valuable to England than the amount of money now spent in it by the Irish absentees. Reciprocal advantages would bind the islands together, and make them indeed the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

Thus the moral and material interests of a free and generous people would be assured and a great national object attained, without infringing on vested rights and (since the scheme is self-supporting) without adding to the burdens of the State.

LEWIS MOFFATT.







